



The indomitable spirit

British army officer, explorer and travel writer - **Sir Ranulph Fiennes'** life reads like something out of a Boy's Own annual.

Charlotte Reather spoke to the 'world's greatest living explorer'



By Charlotte Reather
Charlotte is a leading country lifestyle journalist, comedy writer and mother of two

AS A MARITIME NATION, Britain is rather good at exploration. The names of Drake, Scott and Shackleton are firmly embedded into the national consciousness.

Sir Ranulph Fiennes is the modern-day inheritor of this rich tradition, with polar expeditions, marathons, gruelling treks, and in 2009 – at the age of 65 – he became the first OAP to scale Mount Everest. As we spoke to him – like the rest of the UK – 76-year-old Sir Ranulph was experiencing a more restricted lifestyle, spending lockdown at the Cheshire farm he now shares with his wife, Louise, a horse breeder, and their daughter.

"I'm currently finishing my biography of Shackleton and embarking on a book about TE Lawrence - and taking each day as it comes," he says.

The seeds of adventure were sown in the English countryside where Ran started his legendary night climbs in the village of Lodsworth, near Midhurst, West Sussex and completed his first 'Swallows and Amazons'-style expedition with his sister: navigating the Rivers Lod, Rother and Arun to the sea at Littlehampton, aged just 15.

However, he spent nine years of his childhood living in South Africa (where his grandmother's family lived) after his father was killed in the Battle of Monte Cassino during World War Two.

"My three sisters, Mum and I arrived back in England when I was 10 and rented a cottage in Liphook before finding our home in Lodsworth, near Midhurst," he explains. "With the greatest luck, our nearest neighbours, about half a mile

down on the other side of the River Lod, were the Pepper family and they had a nine-year-old daughter called Ginny."

Ginny was later to become Ran's first wife and expedition base commander.

"At the back of our cottage was a field with cattle in – you'd walk through the field and come to a bridge called Eel Bridge (because there were eels in the River Lod) and that's where I would see Ginny riding her pony through the woods. I used to sit in the trees watching her, until eventually I plucked up the courage to say hello."

Sadly, their love story ended prematurely when Ginny was lost to cancer, aged 56.

"When away on the main expeditions, the contact base became home," he says. "The base commander was my late wife, so home was wherever she was."

After many gruelling expeditions, the couple settled on Exmoor after Ran's first novel, 'The Sett', became a hit. Much of his training also took place on the moor.

"It's very unpopulated up there – you can go for 16 miles over the Doone Valley and on The Chains above Lynmouth and not run into a single soul, even in mid-August."

While Ran trained and planned his expeditions, Ginny looked after her herd of Aberdeen Angus cattle and Black Welsh Mountain sheep, braving the harsh weather of Exmoor.

"The farm has very good grass, long after other farms. The village of Exford is at least a mile away and very often we'd ring up someone in the village

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You can go for 16 miles over the Doone Valley... and not see a single soul

and they'd say 'how lovely it is today', when we were in thick fog. The opposite, of course, was equally true, too."

His early years were punctuated by spells at Eton College and vigorous training in the Scots Greys Regiment, leading to a short spell in the SAS, which came to an explosive end after an attempt to blow up a dam built by the Hollywood studio filming 'Dr Doolittle' in his local village – which Fiennes found distasteful – ended in arrest and probation.

Undeterred, Ran cracked on with his chosen path, becoming feted by the Guinness Book of Records in 1984 as 'the world's greatest living explorer'. He remains the only person to hold the world record for the Global Reach Challenge, having crossed both icecaps and summited Everest.

He also holds the Guinness Record for circumnavigating the earth vertically, discovered a lost Arabian city in Oman after a search spanning 25 years, and ran seven marathons in seven days on seven continents, soon after a heart attack and surgery. In addition, he has raised some £19 million for charity, provided scientific and medical communities with data from polar expeditions and written some 25 books.

And it's this force of nature and indomitable spirit that the English Spirit Distillery has attempted to bottle with their Sir Ranulph Fiennes' Great British Rum, launched in 2019.

Ran says: "Rum is synonymous with the British Navy, polar exploration and pioneers. When we were on the Transglobe Expedition [1979-1982] – a never-repeated 52,000-mile death-defying journey across the globe vertically via both poles – there was a tradition, each day, of raising a toast to the team and family and friends back home. Teammate Oliver Shepherd was in the drinks trade, so kept the bar well-stocked."

The English Spirit Distillery's master distiller, John Walters, wanted to create a rum inspired by Ran's expeditions, so used sequoia wood conjuring his battles through the wilds and rivers of British



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Columbia [1971], date palm, marking his discovery of the lost city of Ubar in Oman, and pine from Norway, where Ran did months of polar training.

"Ran's rum is one of only a handful of British rums fermented and distilled here in the UK, making it truly English through and through, like Sir Ran himself," says John.

The country life

Despite the globe-trotting, it's clear that Ran enjoys rural life. "I would come back from an expedition and for a few months or few years even, I would help Ginny on the farm doing whatever she suggested," he says. "Often, I'd take the cattle to the south west's shows. We would borrow a lorry to take the cattle to the shows and I would wear a tweed cap, white coat, and Aberdeen Angus Society tie and lead the cows or bulls."

However, in 2000, Ran was not much use as farm hand. "I'd come back from my first solo expedition across the Arctic where I suffered extreme frostbite (at -49C) to my left fingers - essentially leaving them dead."

"Ginny's reaction was typical: 'We're already short-handed on the farm!', she told *The Times*, 'we know several people on Exmoor who have lost bits of fingers or worse in farm machinery or with ferret bites. As long as Ran doesn't leave his finger bits on the edge of the bath, as he once did with a blackened toe...!'

"I was told not to have them amputated for five months to allow the good skin to stretch over the stumps, but on the farm, at the four-month point, I couldn't take the pain anymore so I went to Exford village shop and bought some fretsaw blades, put my little finger in a vice, and gently sawed it off. A finger a day, and finally the thumb, which took two days."

He put his digits in a box, which sits on his desk. "I didn't want to throw them away!"

Although formally retired from adventure, I ask if Ran has any plans on the horizon. "Every year I like to do a gentle walk around the Snowdon horseshoe. Last year, we did it with my American nephew and his family from Augusta, Georgia.

"We did it in the howling rain but kept saying to my nephew's children: 'come on, when we get to the top there's a wonderful restaurant' so when we finally got there and it was closed, it was all rather upsetting!"



ACTION MAN:
In army days and the Omani desert

